

Hill, St. Clare

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THE PRESENT NECESSITY FOR ATTENTION TO THE
GENERAL AND SPECIAL HYGIENE OF THE BLIND.

By the Rev. ST. CLARE HILL, M.A.,
Principal of School for the Blind, Leatherhead.

THE most superficial knowledge of the literatures of the world convinces us that the subject of hygiene has always received consideration.

The medical world has, for generations, been commendably active, but it is only during the last thirty years that the subject of hygiene has been systematically treated by the teachers in our schools.

The results of those thirty years of conscientious labour have been remarkable, the number of deaths from certain diseases is strikingly reduced, many visitations are changed to those of a milder form, and a few are on the point of disappearing.

Systematic teaching in our schools has spread such information as is essential to healthy living.

It has occurred to those interested in the blind that the time has come for the extension of the knowledge of the laws of health to that afflicted and seriously handicapped class of society. At the present moment there is no book published in blind type on this subject, and I believe that in no blind school in the United Kingdom is the subject of hygiene treated as a part of the scheme of education. The result is that,

beyond certain casual information, a blind youth enters upon the battle of life handicapped, not only by his infirmity, but also by the absence of that almost indispensable necessity, accurate knowledge of the laws of health and of the daily requirements of mind and body.

And further, if there is any difference in this matter between a blind and a sighted child, the necessity is greater with the former, because sight is frequently an important correcting influence. For instance, the sight of a dirty skin suggests washing; an ill-shapen or deformed body suggests care; the pale face of one who habitually lives in a close atmosphere suggests outdoor exercise. There are many ways in which unsatisfactory conditions are corrected through the appearance of the sufferer. I therefore desire to urge that the teaching of the principles of hygiene to the blind is a pressing need and of even greater importance than to the sighted.

The title of the paper refers to the *present* necessity for attention to the general and special hygiene of the blind.

The word "present" is used because it is believed that *now* the blind have, in consequence of the effective and salutary working of the Education Act of 1893, arrived at such a stage that they can largely benefit from such instruction, and that further improvement in the physique and general conditions of health is being severely handicapped through the lack of scientific knowledge of the laws of health.

It must not be concluded from these remarks that the blind are generally less intelligent and less informed than the sighted. Such a conclusion would, indeed, be most erroneous. For, on the contrary, taking the two, class by class, the blind have the advantage of the sighted, largely because, in consequence of their deprivation, a greater demand is made upon the memory and the reasoning faculties. But it must never be forgotten that, by reason of a restricted literature and certain other disabilities, the blind are cut off from those sources of reliable information which are open to the sighted.

As a consequence, although the blind have a large stock of information upon subjects in general, still, for the most part, it has been collected from hearsay sources, and is thereby less accurate and less reliable.

I am therefore desirous of stating there is room at the present moment for the publication of an elementary treatise on the subject of hygiene, printed in blind type, so that it may be read and carefully studied.

The well-to-do blind are in close and continual touch with the influences at work in society for better housing, healthier sanitation and more satisfactory hygienic conditions of life. They are removed from the inconveniences and misfortunes of bad ventilation, inadequate accommodation, and inability to provide proper clothing and suitable food. Again, their friends make self-denying efforts to secure for them healthy and pleasant occupations and regular and acceptable exercise. In short, the well-to-do blind usually live under most favourable conditions, carefully watched over by affectionate relations and friends, so that generally almost ideal conditions of life are possible without any serious effort.

The lot of the majority of the blind is widely different. Too often our sightless brother is isolated and has to manage for himself or fall away into a mode of living the opposite of what is hoped for by the disciples of the professors of hygiene. His early life is frequently but a period of neglect, because the parent has to attend to the duties of his daily avoca-

tion and frequently the first taste of efficient supervision and care only comes to him when he enters an institution or a school.

Since the duty of building up a healthy mind and body in our blind so frequently falls upon institutions and schools, it is of the greatest importance that the authorities, whose business it is to provide for their management, shall be keenly alive to their responsibilities.

And what do we find ?

Twenty-five years ago nearly every workshop provided for blind people was a disgrace inasmuch as it failed to fulfil the most elementary requirements of the laws of health. It was dark, ill ventilated, oftentimes underground, and not infrequently cold and damp. The blind artisan, whose vitality is lower than that of his sighted friend, was permitted to further reduce the unsatisfactory conditions of the apartment by keeping the windows closed in order to raise the temperature. Even nowadays there remains a relict of the same error, for it is quite a characteristic of these people to persist in closing a window. Possibly this arises from a condition of lower vitality produced by the difficulty of obtaining vigorous exercise.

Again, twenty-five years ago, it was deemed unnecessary to supply light to a blind person. Wherever light was provided it was said to be for the use of the sighted foreman or for the purposes of supervision. In the course of my duties as Government inspector, I have had occasions to visit most of the institutions for the blind in Europe, and I observed that while some of the results of instruction were highly satisfactory, reflecting the greatest credit upon those in charge, still, speaking generally, only in the modern teachers did I find a desire for abundant light and air. Yet a plant, which does not depend upon eyesight, requires both of these for its perfect growth. I could name several institutions where pupils spend many hours a day in semi-darkness ; and in two schools I found men working all day long in an apartment without a window and without any effective provision for ventilation.

Again, at the present time, many institutions have extremely limited grounds for exercise and play. It has been argued that the blind can take part in so few games that a small yard is therefore sufficient for the purpose of sitting out-of-doors. But the air of a yard becomes vitiated, and consequently unfitted to the requirements of those sent out to "take the air." Besides, there are several games in which the young blind can and do take part, and, moreover, in which they secure a great deal of pleasure. Skipping, running and jumping are quite easily possible. A little mechanical contrivance is sometimes necessary. Nearly all the benefits obtained by a sighted person in many games and pastimes are possible to a blind child, if only a proper space is provided, supplemented by a small amount of ingenuity on the part of the instructor.

Again, several institutions are still without a gymnasium, and even where they are provided they are frequently grossly inadequate. Of forty schools for the education of blind children in England only six have a *large* gymnasium. The blind are necessarily much restricted in the ways in which they can take exercise. They cannot, to any large extent, join in football, cricket, and many other games in which youth takes its pleasures, while securing bodily exercise, but they can join in even the more difficult feats and gyrations of the gymnasium.

And, still further, in most of the schools where a gymnasium is pro-

vided, the pupils spend only an hour or two per week, such times as the drill-sergeant has been appointed to attend. As an answer to my suggestion that lessons should be more frequent, economy has been urged; and when I have proposed that the pupils should voluntarily visit the gymnasium, the question of suitable supervision has proved an insuperable difficulty. Females are often not permitted to receive this kind of instruction. But since the blind are cut off from so many opportunities of developing their physique, a special effort should be made to grant them facilities to use daily that form of exercise in which it is proved they can readily take part. And surely there is as much reason for females to come under this particular kind of instruction as males.

We have all noticed how badly blind people walk, and possibly have been impressed by their unsightly gait. They never will walk properly, with erect body and with fearless, confident steps until they have been taught so to do.

A properly organised home or institution for the blind should be controlled by those who have reflected upon the necessity of recognising, on physiological grounds, the demands of the sensorial machinery of the body; that only by exercise, cleanliness, diet, pure air, warmth, proper clothing, abundant light, and instruction in walking and running can the individual grow as he should in health, strength and vitality.

The school curriculum should include regular weekly lessons on clothing, food, habitation, occupations, sanitation, and questions affecting personal hygiene. By a carefully devised course of instruction the blind person should be taught how to breathe properly, the imperative necessity of personal cleanliness, the advantage of an upright gait, the power of grasping long and short distances, the capability of managing for himself all matters connected with his own well-being.

And one other word in reference to institutions, and that a crying want of these times. The parents of our poorer blind have to take care not to fall behind in the competition of earning a living. While this competition is proceeding, think for a moment what is happening day after day to the blind babe. The mother has regularly to attend to her work in order to secure even a pittance of a living wage. The baby must be left at home, oftentimes in the charge of a small brother or sister, or, if not, in the care of some hired person who has but the smallest interest in its well-being. The almost inevitable result is that the ordinary wants of the child are neglected, and certainly the smallest attention is given to the many hygienic considerations which the offspring of a wealthy person is receiving hourly. For the salvation of such an infant the only scheme I can think of is the establishment of a *crèche*, where a suitably skilled motherly person would attend to the child's ever-present needs. It could be conducted at small cost, and would be a life-long benefit to many afflicted human creatures. These *crèches* should be attached to existing blind institutions and might be made almost self-supporting.

The same spirit of healthy surroundings should be carefully and regularly insisted upon by the managers of those factories where the blind work after the school-days have passed away. The rooms should be airy, light, warm, and well ventilated. They should be patterns of perfect sanitation, and attention should be given to that which is often indifferently supplied, namely, proper and abundant accommodation for

washing. The manager could easily extend his sphere of good work by taking an active and personal interest in the homes in which his employees reside. Many evils would be avoided by a kindly visit followed up by tactful and sympathetic advice.

The blind artisan often does not know what to do with his spare evening hours; he has nowhere to go but his humble lodgings, unless it is to places which may lead him into temptation. The philanthropist can find wide scope for his energies in the endeavour to provide and maintain a special polytechnic for his blind friends, or a special department in existing polytechnics. The ordinary institution of this kind is useless in many ways to the blind, but wherever there is a colony of these afflicted people there might be established a place where could be secured healthy entertainment, instructive light literature, a gymnasium, and other means of affording opportunities for healthy mental and bodily development.

When such an institution has been called into being steps should be taken to supply a continuance of instruction in hygienic principles after the pattern, but perhaps more comprehensive in nature, of those given in the schools. To make such lectures a success they must be of a popular character, delivered by one who is capable of importing into them special interest to make them attractive and entertaining.

The object aimed at when dealing with the young or older blind is to create an ideal, and to point out both the advantages of endeavouring to approximate it, and whatever facilities towards that end may be available.

The great thing is to make him feel the pleasure of striving to realise such an ideal, so that he may be dissatisfied unless he is moving towards it. In other words, to supplement his knowledge with the will-power of desire to attain, for, after all, we cannot do more than call into existence the hope for, and point out the possibility of obtaining, these better things.

Towards this end the general public can do a great deal in taking an interest in the concerns of this afflicted section of itself, lending a helping hand of brotherly love, kindly consideration and tactful advice.

I do not think I can better sum up my remarks than by saying our mind and body have been given to us to take care of as well as we possibly can. We are entrusted with these two wonderful gifts, and we altogether fail in our duty unless we not only take the greatest care of them ourselves, but also see that we give evidence of a genuine desire to assist our less fortunate brother in a similar discharge of his personal responsibility.

THE HYGIENE OF THE TEETH AND MOUTH IN THE SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF.

By G. FERRERI, Rome.

It is well known that for some time past the anthropological examination of the deaf has shown that one of the most frequent signs of degeneration is certainly that of a defective dentition.

There may be many causes for this, but it is only of interest to us to

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